

CMAP



Chinatown Community Vision Plan Executive Summary

DECEMBER 2014



The Chinatown Community Vision Plan will provide a framework for future decision making that aligns with long-term goals. This executive summary highlights many of the key recommendations from the plan, which is the result of nearly two years of work led by the Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC), 25th Ward Alderman Daniel Solis, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) with the Chinatown community's residents, business owners, workers, and community leaders.



OVERVIEW

In 1912, the Chinatown community moved from the southern edge of downtown Chicago to its present location centered at Cermak Road and Wentworth Avenue. The neighborhood has developed its own unique sense of place over the years, but Chinatown has never had its own plan to guide development in ways that align with community priorities.

The boundaries of the study area for the Community Vision Plan are 18th Street to the north, the Stevenson Expressway to the south, Clark Street to the east, and the Chicago River to the west. Plan recommendations tied to place fall within this study area, which represents the commercial core of the Chinatown neighborhood. They also reflect the broader context of greater Chinatown, a much larger area that includes many adjacent neighborhoods, which are home to significant numbers of Asian-American residents (many of whom are Chinese American).

Photo by **Mary Anne Enriquez**.





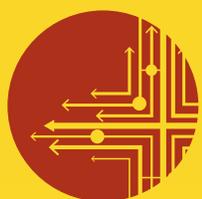
To better understand and address the community’s needs and vision for Chinatown’s future, CMAP researched existing conditions and worked with the project’s Steering Committee to conduct numerous community engagement activities and gather public feedback. In total, approximately 1,800 residents and stakeholders participated in the community engagement process. The research, analysis, and community input helped form the plan’s vision.

It is clear that the Chinatown community has great pride and ambitions for the future. Seven overarching principles emerged to guide the strategies outlined in the Vision Plan:

- Build upon the past accomplishments and current efforts of Chinatown’s community organizations, family associations, business leaders, community residents, and elected officials.
- Strengthen Chinatown’s role as the center of Chinese culture and community for the Chicago area.
- Foster a lively, safe, clean, and vibrant community that provides a mix of retail, restaurants, services, and other amenities for both visitors and residents.
- Connect “Old Chinatown” and “New Chinatown,” strengthening the community’s central core.
- Facilitate cooperation between the City and business community to attract and maintain thriving local businesses.
- Improve transportation accessibility in and around Chinatown.
- Strengthen human capital in the community by improving opportunities for education and career development for all Chinatown residents.

Photo by **Sharyne Moy Tu.** |





KEY STRATEGIES

The Chinatown Community Vision Plan recommends many specific strategies to help residents, businesses, community leaders, and elected officials achieve the vision set forth for Chinatown. The full plan describes each strategy and details the partners responsible for implementation. This summary highlights a few of the many strategies recommended in the full plan.



Photo by
Chicago Chinatown Special Events
Committee.



Safety

Chinatown will become a more vibrant neighborhood, where the community feels comfortable, connected, and at home.

Strategy: Increase activity in key areas and improve communication to strengthen the community (and reduce crime).

“Safety” was revealed to be the number one concern of the 1,300 people who responded to the project’s survey. The importance of this issue to the community was underscored throughout the community engagement process.

In addition to specific strategies that include the targeted improvement of lighting in public spaces such as parks and along sidewalks, Chinatown should increase activity in key areas throughout the community by making its public areas places where people want to be. This is especially important for Chinatown’s most frequently used public spaces—its streets. Not only should Chinatown’s streets be easy and comfortable for people of all ages to traverse, ideally they should also be pleasant places for them to linger and socialize. Fortunately, implementation of many of these recommendations is already planned for the center of Chinatown as part of the City’s improvements related to the upcoming realignment of Wentworth, construction of Chinatown’s new library, and creation of the new Wells-Wentworth Connector up to Roosevelt Road. In addition, commercial development that is expected to accompany these large-scale physical improvements by the City will help fill in and increase pedestrian activity in key gap areas.

Language and cultural dynamics can pose challenges to reporting on safety and crime, especially since 65 percent of residents in Chinatown’s core are foreign-born (9 percent of whom first arrived in the U.S. during the past three years), and 57 percent speak Chinese at home and speak English less than “very well.”¹ But the City’s recent Chicago New Americans Plan commits the City to “improve its policies and procedures to ensure immigrants feel welcomed and protected.” The Chinatown community should work together to utilize all resources currently available for reporting crime and fostering active dialogue with the Chicago Police Department. The Steering Committee for the Community Vision Plan can provide leadership to ensure that all available resources are serving to build this essential relationship between the community and law enforcement.

¹ Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-12 American Community Survey.



Transportation, Circulation, and Streets

The Chinatown neighborhood will be accessible to residents and visitors alike. The existing transportation network will provide all users with a variety of safe options for moving in and around Chinatown. The transportation network will seamlessly connect pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and drivers to both Old and New Chinatown.

Strategy: Strengthen the connection between Old and New Chinatown.

A broad spectrum of the community is concerned about the division within Chinatown's core between "Old Chinatown," defined by Wentworth and other areas to the south of Cermak, and "New Chinatown," defined by Chinatown Square and the area to the north of Archer Avenue. While both areas serve important roles in the community, the benefits enjoyed by one are not fully shared with the other. In particular, many residents are concerned about the future prospects of businesses in Old Chinatown.

Multiple factors contribute to this divide. Many stem from the large triangle-shaped block formed by Cermak, Archer, and Wentworth, which is a barrier for pedestrian visibility and travel between Old and New Chinatown. In addition, difficult pedestrian crossings currently exist at all three corners of the block. The City's plan to realign Wentworth will improve the street's intersections at both Cermak and Archer for pedestrians and cars alike. Nearby, the City is also considering the addition of a mid-block crossing across Archer that would facilitate a more direct pedestrian route between the southern side of Archer and Chinatown Square Plaza.

The remaining intersection—where Cermak, Archer, and Princeton meet—was identified by the community as one of the most problematic locations in the entire Chinatown core. It combines two major thoroughfares for heavy trucks with a primary pedestrian thoroughfare heavily used by local residents, especially seniors and children. The community should comprehensively assess the intersection's problems and consider the full array of potential strategies that may assist with the improvement of this problematic intersection.

Additional Strategies:

- Improve the experience of taking transit to, from, and within Chinatown.
- Improve sidewalks conditions and key pedestrian crossings.
- Improve bicycling infrastructure.
- Conduct a comprehensive parking management study.

Photo © 2014 Microsoft Corporation.

Residential Communities

Chinatown will become Chicago's showcase "age-friendly" neighborhood, able to support a high quality of life for a wide range of residents and adapt to changing needs over time.



Strategy: Make Chinatown an "age-friendly" neighborhood.

The influx of younger immigrants to Chinatown, along with the aging population of long-term residents, means that community facilities and services must simultaneously cater to distinct demographics. The community should adapt infrastructure and services to be accessible for people of all ages and with varying degrees of mobility and mental health—particularly the elderly with disabilities or wheelchairs, caretakers with strollers, and young children. In addition, since Chinatown lacks an intermediary level of housing alternatives for elderly residents, the community should assess the need for assisted living housing and advocate for such a facility as new opportunities for housing development arise.

Additional Strategies:

- Ensure quality affordable housing by connecting landlords to resources to improve their properties.
- Advocate for increased housing, activities, and services for seniors.

Photo by
Chinese American Service League.

Economic Development

Chinatown will build upon its extraordinary tourism potential and will be known as the center of Chinese culture and community in metropolitan Chicago. Residents and visitors alike will have access to a unique combination of retail, restaurants services, and amenities reflective of Chinatown’s cultural diversity and strengths. Small businesses will continue to be integral to the success of Chinatown, and supporting the success of local business owners will be a top priority of the community.



Strategy: Strengthen Chinatown’s capacity to build upon its tourism potential.

Chinatown is already a major tourist destination for local, regional, and even international visitors, with annual events that draw enormous crowds to the neighborhood. But due to their small size and other constraints, many Chinatown businesses are not taking full advantage of visiting tour groups. The community should build the administrative and marketing capacity of local restaurateurs and small businesses to connect and work with regular tour groups. Partnering with Choose Chicago, the City’s official tourism organization, can boost the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce’s ability to embark on joint promotional campaigns and better equip local businesses to work with the tourism industry, helping the community better capitalize upon and attract business from tourism.

Additional Strategies:

- Leverage partnerships to strengthen training and support for existing local businesses.
- Conduct market study to determine viable options that will increase the diversity of Chinatown’s retail.

Photo by
Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce.



Education and Workforce

Local service providers will work together to ensure that all of Chinatown's residents have equitable access to education and career development opportunities.



Strategy: Strengthen resources and improve options for students entering high school and their parents.

The Chinatown community should work closely with local elementary and high schools to develop practical resources that help students entering high school, and their parents, to navigate the education system and engage with the school community. The community should also engage in a comprehensive examination of Chinatown's educational needs at the high school level, especially any shared with neighboring communities, to evaluate all feasible options, such as new targeted programs or institutions.

Additional Strategies:

- Expand services for Chinatown's residents with limited English proficiency.
- Work with the City Colleges of Chicago to develop pipelines for residents to enter the workforce.

Photo by
Chinese American Service League.



Parks and Public Spaces

Our community will strive to protect and enhance local parks and amenities. Chinatown will build off of prized community assets, like Ping Tom Park, and encourage additional pocket-parks or green space that will be safe, clean, and accessible assets for residents of all ages.



Strategy: Engage the stakeholders of Chinatown in the maintenance of their community.

Concern over the appearance of Chinatown is one of the top priorities of the community. Chinatown needs to organize a high-visibility initiative that instills pride and encourages a sense of ownership by engaging residents and business owners in the maintenance of their community's streets, sidewalks, parks, and other public spaces. This also will require working with landlords and businesses to ensure that all residences and commercial establishments have access to designated dumpsters for their properties (and that those dumpsters are used), along with developing an effective educational campaign on littering and illegal waste disposal, as well as appropriate protocol for notifying the Streets and Sanitation Department of full public garbage containers.

Additional Strategies:

- Activate parks and public spaces through innovative “placemaking” and enhanced streetscaping.
- Improve safety of parks and public spaces through effective lighting and landscaping strategies.
- Develop effective signage and advertising to increase awareness of park amenities and activities.
- Identify priorities for increasing community green spaces as part of future redevelopment.

| Photo by **Wesley Ng**.



Future Development

The community will work together and in partnership with its neighbors to identify and evaluate the opportunities for future development within Chinatown's core and in adjacent areas, determining wise priorities that will improve the function and enhance the character of the neighborhood and the surrounding area.

Strategy: Define community priorities for future development within Chinatown's core.

Bounded by transit rails to the east, the Chicago River to the west, and highways to the south, Chinatown's core has very limited space available for growth. But a few key areas in Chinatown's core have the potential to dramatically redefine and improve the landscape of the community (see map at left):

Opportunity Area 1: East side of Wentworth, between Cermak and Archer

With the upcoming realignment of Wentworth, an expanded block will be created here. Effective mixed-use development on this site could enhance and redefine this location as the heart of the community and Chinatown's central arrival point, strengthening the connection between Old and New Chinatown along Wentworth, and between Chinatown and McCormick Place to the east along a revitalized Cermak corridor.

Opportunity Area 2: East side of Wentworth, north of Archer

Development on the east side of Wentworth north of Archer could improve the streetscape and increase pedestrian activity on the corner, enhance the gateway into Chinatown via Archer, and activate this part of Wentworth, which serves as the main pedestrian route to and from Ping Tom Park and the new Fieldhouse. Also, with the planned construction of the Wells-Wentworth Connector, this location will eventually serve as the southern end of a new mixed-use corridor, stretching up to Roosevelt Road, featuring new bus transit and bicycle and pedestrian activity.





**Opportunity Area 3:
North side of Archer, between Wentworth and Cermak**

The outward appearance of Chinatown Square is largely defined by its service entrances, which face the street. Not only is this less-than-ideal in terms of attractiveness, it appears to lead to confusion for some visitors, who are unaware of the pleasant, vibrant pedestrian mall that is found within.

In addition, Chinatown Square is set far back behind two parking areas alongside the north side of Archer. The parking areas contribute to several problems, including a relatively low-quality streetscape and hazardous conditions for pedestrians, bicyclists, and cars. These parking areas are owned by the City and have the potential to be the site of future commercial development, which could improve the outward appearance and function of Chinatown Square, enhance the quality of the streetscape, and increase safety.

**Opportunity Area 4:
South side of Archer, between Wentworth and Cermak**

Chinatown’s new library at the southwestern corner of Archer and Wentworth will help generate new activity and energy that can extend all the way down the block on the south side of Archer to its intersection with Cermak. This important area could be further enhanced and revitalized by filling in the block’s vacant sites along the south side of the street with commercial infill development, especially if coupled with wise streetscape improvements and innovative “placemaking” strategies.

**Opportunity Area 5:
Undeveloped site on the north side of Tan Court, between Princeton and Lee Parkway**

There is an acute shortage of senior housing within Chinatown’s core, and the demand for senior housing in Chinatown, especially assisted living residential options, is expected to grow in coming years. New senior housing could be ideally suited to this undeveloped site, which is located virtually adjacent to the Chinese American Service League (CASL) (with its many services for seniors) and just around the corner from CASL Senior Housing, a Walgreens, and Chinatown Square.

Strategy: Position the community to work with neighboring communities and benefit from anticipated development in adjacent areas.

During the past few decades, the Chinese population has expanded south and southwest from Chinatown’s core. This is likely to continue, expanding many people’s definition of what constitutes “Chinatown.” In addition, large-scale development, with the potential to greatly benefit—or even expand—Chinatown, is underway or expected in adjacent areas outside of the core to the north, east, and west (see map below). To maximize the benefits generated by development in these neighboring locations, a framework needs to be created that helps the community to contribute to future planning decisions outside of Chinatown’s boundaries, which will ensure that Chinatown is poised to work with neighboring communities when new developments arise.



Anticipated development in areas adjacent to Chinatown’s core.



Long-Term Capacity Building

Chinatown will be known for its high degree of coordination between elected officials, local leaders, and numerous service providers. Together, local leaders and the community will work to strengthen Chinatown's existing assets by fully participating in future planning activities to ensure the growth and stability of Chinatown for decades to come.



Strategy: Create a framework for sustained, inclusive community involvement in planning decisions.

The Steering Committee that was formed to guide the development of the Community Vision Plan should provide leadership that is broad, representative, and responsible for facilitating cooperation between members of the community, in partnership with the City, to implement the plan's recommendations. Beyond the implementation of plan recommendations, the goal should be to ensure that this effort is inclusive, transparent, and comprehensive.

No plan can cover every issue or opportunity that will need to be addressed by the community in the coming years. Therefore, the Steering Committee should aim to help establish a framework for sustained, inclusive community engagement, which can help Chinatown address a broader range of challenges and opportunities, both immediate and long-term.

Looking to the future, the Steering Committee should ensure that opportunity and responsibility for community leadership is shared across a wider, diverse network of people, helping to preserve knowledge of best practices and institutional memory, as well as foster the next generation of community leaders.

Photo by Casey Cora, DNAinfo.



Take Action

We need your help to make the Chinatown Community Vision Plan a reality. To find out how you can become a part of the process, please visit: <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/programs-and-resources/lta/chinatown>.

| Photo by Tom Shell.



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CMAP is the region's official comprehensive planning organization. Its GO TO 2040 planning campaign is helping the region's seven counties and 284 communities to implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality of life issues.

See www.cmapillinois.gov for more information.

Unless otherwise specified, all photos are by CMAP staff.